



## Article

# Ernst Bloch as a Non-Simultaneous Jewish Marxist

Przemysław Tacik 

Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University, Gołębia 24, 31-007 Kraków, Poland;  
przemyslaw.tacik@uj.edu.com

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**Abstract:** The paper attempts to reassess the fundamentally paradoxical position of Ernst Bloch in 20th century philosophy in the light of the Marranic condition. Indebted, among others, to Jewish heritage and Christian tradition, Bloch considered himself primarily a Marxist. Bloch's uniqueness consists in the stunning equiponderance of the currents he drew from. Contrary to a classic model of modern Jewish philosophy, inaugurated by Hermann Cohen, Bloch's thinking does not allow of easy juxtaposition of "sources" with languages into which they were translated. In this sense, Bloch cannot be easily compared to Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas or even Walter Benjamin (although he bore some striking similarities with the latter). His position at least partly stems from a specific form of directness with which he often used these languages, composing his philosophy in quite an anachronist manner. For this reason his thinking—in itself "*die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*", as one of his key concepts theorises—is a very modern, internally incoherent space of cross-fertilising inspirations. The paper demonstrates two levels on which Bloch's indebtedness to Judaism might be analysed and then re-assesses his Marxist affiliations as a kind of modern faith which, in a specifically Marranic manner, seals the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.

**Keywords:** Ernst Bloch; Jewish philosophy; Marranism; Messianism; Marxism; utopia; Lurianic Kabbalah

## 1. Introduction

Among other modern philosophical Marranos Ernst Bloch occupies an uneasy and paradoxical position. At least at first sight little digging is required to find traces of Jewish inspirations in his writings; quite often they are either openly admitted by the author or simply self-evident. For this reason it might seem that Bloch performs too little hiding to be taken for a Marrano, especially in comparison with such masters of concealment and play as Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1993, p. 170). To make the situation more complicated, Jewish inspirations not only do not seem to be predominant in Bloch's work, but occasionally are overtly downgraded. They are intermingled with innumerable sources of multifarious origin: Marxism, German Idealism, utopianism, political journalism, philosophy of music, expressionism, etc. which are juxtaposed with little, if any, ambitions of attaining coherence. Consequently, the disclosed but clear structure of translation<sup>1</sup> (or encryption) that we might expect from the Marrano phenomenon—which might be viewed as negotiating one's own idiom on the basis of Jewish inspirations and the language of Western philosophy—is here at

<sup>1</sup> As Agata Bielik-Robson puts it, "We can thus see 'Jewish philosophy' as a primarily linguistic problem: speaking one language with the help of another, a case of an instantaneous bilingualism. This brings us immediately to yet another metaphor coming from the Jewish tradition, namely that of Marranos, the Spanish Jews forced to convert to Christianity, who nonetheless preserved their secret Jewish faith: the Marranic 'Judaism undercover', where the unspoken Hebrew shines through but also subverts the overtly spoken dialect of the imposed 'speech of strangers', in this case the Christian religion. It is not an accident that the first Jewish thinkers who entered the world of modern Western thought were mostly of Marrano origin . . ." Bielik-Robson declares that the goal of philosophical Marranos is "to marry the speech of strangers and let the Hebrew talk through it: to do counter-philosophy with the help of philosophy." (Bielik-Robson 2014, p. 4).

least distorted, if not inexistent. In the incessant stream of Bloch's writing, not rarely bordering on logorrhoea, all the sources mix in unexpected proportions and combinations. Jewish inspirations appear out of nowhere and, at least at first reading, do not seem to provide a broader pattern that could solidly inform interpretation of Bloch's thinking.

Moreover, even if we stick to religious sources which are present in his writing, Judaism is merely one tradition among others. It has been often suggested that Bloch was at his heart a modern Gnostic greatly indebted to Basilides and Marcion, particularly in his vision of vengeful God, the role of cognition in bringing about redemption (Christen 1979, p. 61) and apocalyptic demand for destruction of this world in the name of justice (Boldyrev 2014, pp. 92–95). Nevertheless, much as Bloch overtly confesses his interest in Gnosticism, the exact influence of this current—complex in itself—on the totality of Blochian thinking is difficult to pinpoint. Apart from Gnosticism Bloch delighted in combining other religious traditions: the impact of Christianity on his work is overwhelming to such an extent that sometimes Judaism seems to pale in comparison with it. It needs to be admitted that this Christianity is interpreted in a very specific way—namely as a tradition which accomplishes the whole potential of rebellion present in Judaism and declares human independence from the dead God (Bloch 2009, pp. 122–23)—but even this Hegelian-Nietzschean twist in the perception of Christ cannot diminish the overall domination of Christianity in Bloch's thinking. Even if we take into account how meaningless deathbed confessions sometimes might be, the declaration of deep indebtedness to Christianity that he made shortly before his death (Boldyrev 2014, p. 106) must make his Marrano status somewhat unsure.

To sum up, the unprecedented variegation of the used sources makes Bloch's work profoundly paradoxical. On the one hand, all the ingredients are still recognisable in the incoherent and sometimes shapeless stream of Blochian writing, which makes discovering Jewish inspirations an easy, perhaps all-too-easy task. On the other hand, this patchwork conceals a few major philosophical complexes of ideas whose roots are more unclear. Therefore, I suggest, re-reading Bloch in the light of the Marrano phenomenon must consist of two layers: the epithelial and the deep. The first offers the reader philosophical miracles, but made of tombac; the second is more promising, but requires more risky interpretation. The (post-)deconstructionist self-awareness cannot make any of them prevail only by virtue of their own respective positions. Contrariwise, it is their mutual entanglement that makes Bloch a special Marrano who cannot be saved from the conundrum of Jewish inspirations and Western philosophy by any kind of translation.

These observations determine the research programme for confronting Bloch's thinking with the Marrano metaphor. Firstly, the epithelial level—Jewish traces in his life and writings—will be examined. Secondly, I will attempt to undertake a more perilous path of interpretation in order to re-construct the very core of Bloch's thinking as a form of Lurianism. Finally, I will explore relations and tensions between the two in order to find the appropriate form of Marranism which would be pertinent to Bloch. The overarching framework of this exploration will be provided by one of his best known concepts: *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*, the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.

## 2. The Epithelial

The epithelial level of Bloch's specific Marrano position is determined by a few grounding characteristics of his life and thinking. It is in this perspective that Jewish sources and inspirations stand out as clear references in Bloch's work. All that is necessary at this level is a comprehensive reading: shards of Judaism are easily identifiable.

### 2.1. An Overtly Marranic Life

To begin at the very obvious level, Ernst Bloch received a Jewish religious upbringing, but to little avail. Just after his bar-mitzvah, he stated publicly in the synagogue three times that he was an atheist (Münster 2001, p. 34). Often repeated as an anecdote, this story conveys much more than a simple tale of a rebellious teenager. Declaring one's atheism after (not during) the bar-mitzvah is a

fundamental inconsequence: why should he take part in the religious ceremony of attaining adulthood and assuming responsibility for his life before God, if he did not believe in God? His behaviour might be obviously interpreted as paying lip service to the community only to break out and rebel afterwards, but the stunning temerity of combining bar-mitzvah with a confession of atheism makes it more fascinating. Perhaps this paradox augurs incoherences in Bloch's future thinking: he both confesses and denies, uses a source to twist its meaning, declares his loyalty to a given idea only to juxtapose it with something most foreign to it. At this level, there is hardly any reconciliation between contradictory ideas. They appear one after another. In Bloch's texts they are joined by the common thread of writing, just like the author joined his bar-mitzvah with a declaration of atheism.

This anecdote bears an intriguing affinity to another quality of Blochian thinking. He was very eager to pour new wine into old casks, turning trite concepts into their opposites. Perhaps the best example is the central concept of Bloch's reflection: utopia. Inherited from authors largely fallen into oblivion apart from their role of dummies in handbooks of political philosophy, and at best treated with suspicion and mockery (Sorel 1999, p. 28), utopia was in Bloch's re-reading eviscerated of the legacy of exemplary naiveté. The new approach to utopia strips it of unpractical details full of daydreaming in order to turn it towards the future. From that moment utopia is transformed from a static vision of what should be attained to a dynamic power which is always future-oriented and whose particular manifestations—from Campanella and More to Owen and Fourier (Bloch 1995, pp. 479–589)—are just temporary moments which express the general struggle in particular circumstances. This reinterpretation of utopia demonstrates that Bloch was willing to appropriate numerous concepts just in order to use them for his own purposes. Some of these concepts might be unexpected in a Jewish Marxist, for example the idea of *Heimat* (Bloch 1995, pp. 711–45; Miller Jones 1995, pp. 39–54; Jay 1984, pp. 188–89), a term notoriously appropriated by volkists. Nevertheless, Bloch combines in a unique way his conceptual omnivorousness with the skill to reinterpret categories to his own taste and finally juxtapose them in the incessant tapestry of his verbose writing.

Bloch's life displays analogical tendencies. He was considered an instinctive heretic by most people who had a longer contact with him; many commentators return to this observation in order to find for him a fitting category (Hudson 1982, pp. 49, 210; Münster 2001, p. 16; Walser 1968, p. 14). He never found an intellectual milieu in which he felt fully at ease. He missed both of the two best chances he had: among Jewish intellectuals in the interwar period (Georg Lukács, Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Franz Rosenzweig, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer) he was received with suspicion and distrust, whereas the official Marxism to which he attempted to pledge allegiance obviously could not accommodate his excursions into the realm of philosophical daydreaming. Benjamin seemed for a certain time his best kin (Miller Jones 1995, p. 25; Hudson 1982, p. 8; Thompson 2013b, pp. 84, 98; Münster 2001, pp. 128, 135; Münster 1985, pp. 111–24; Boldyrev 2014, pp. 114–58), but the Christian flavour of some of Bloch's writings (especially of *The Spirit of Utopia*) made him ultimately keep his distance (Münster 1985, p. 113). Close contact with Lukács, who in a certain epoch considered Bloch his greatest influence, ended up with feuds over interpretations of Marxism. Lukács accused his friend of pre-Marxist and pre-materialist positions, mysticism and mythology (Hudson 1982, pp. 34–40; Münster 2001, p. 179). Bloch's relationship to the Frankfurt School was very strained (Münster 2001, pp. 210–14), not only because of his unorthodox and non-academic (to put it mildly) writing, but also due to his staunch support of communists and the Soviet Union (to the point of notorious endorsement of the Moscow trials (Miller Jones 1995, p. 19)) which Adorno and Horkheimer deemed unacceptable.

Consistent loyalty to communist parties and state socialism was also warped by Bloch's gut heterodoxy. His consecration as the leading official philosopher of the GDR in 1947—parenthetically, his nomination for Leipzig University was the first academic position he ever obtained, at the age of 62—soon turned sour and Bloch left the GDR in 1961 after spending a few years in the limbo of dissidence, persecution and smear campaign (Münster 2001, pp. 250–74). Yet even when he defected to the West and took a position at the University of Tübingen, he went against the grain

and taught staunch Marxism (Münster 2001, p. 313), becoming for students rebelling in 1968 the only credible member of the academic staff. Upon his death in 1977, he might have said after Septimius Severus: *omnia fui*, although contrary to the Roman emperor's disenchanted conclusion ("*nihil expedit*"), Bloch seemed to have preserved the very same level of satisfaction with his work that he displayed consistently throughout his life. The position of an irredeemable heretic was something he made peace with, remarking in the preface to the German edition of *Atheism in Christianity* that "The best thing about religions is that they produce heretics."<sup>2</sup> (Bloch 1968, p. 15).

His life was similar to his writings: long, inconsistent, full of sudden twists, rejected by priests of all orthodoxies, but unified by the same persistent struggle for his cause and unabating hope. All his formal allegiances to intellectual currents failed in the eyes of his collaborators and friends, because Bloch was apparently unable not to (mis)understand each tradition in his own way. Nonetheless, just as the anecdote about his bar-mitzvah suggests, all the time he needed to feel part of some spiritual community, as if the inevitable rift with it was something that kept happening to him most inadvertently and unintentionally. In this stream Judaism—or, more broadly, Jewish inspirations—were a recurring theme, but never a unique or dominant source of thinking. Moreover, Bloch explicitly disavowed his indebtedness to Judaism, claiming that he was no Buber (Münster 2001, p. 373). He was concerned not to be perceived as determined by one tradition, especially Judaism. For this reason all references to the Kabbalah or, broadly speaking, Jewish spirituality are given equal rights in his works as, say, mentions of Thomas Müntzer, Jakob Böhme, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Gottfried Keller or even Karl May. In this sense, his intellectual tastes were immune to hierarchies and decorum: everything could be mixed with everything, just as in his life he might have been a professor of philosophy at the Marxist university in the GDR and teach more about Hegel and Böhme than about the official Marx.

In a sense, but perhaps within a superficial perspective, Bloch's life epitomises the exile of Jewish intellectuals in the desert of modernity. The world seemed to him a hostile place, the past sources of spirituality ran dry a long time ago. But with the benefit of materialist hindsight, everything that preserved traces of vitality and hope might have been recovered. With this insight, Bloch lived his life—full of adversities, failures and injustices—with amazing belief in a better future. There was hardly any Marranic tension in it, but perhaps unconquerable hope, Bloch's emblem, could be seen as an utterly secularised Jewish faith, which does not need to hide behind the official dogma that rules the world, because they both overlapped to the point of their indifferentiation.

At the beginning of his philosophical path Bloch wrote a famous letter to his friend Lukács, in which he attempted to define his role and position:

Ich bin der Paraklet, und die Menschen, denen ich gesandt bin, werden in sich den heimkehrenden Gott erleben und verstehen. (Bloch 1985a, vol. II, p. 66)

[I am the Paraclete and the people to whom I was sent will experience and understand in themselves God returning to his homeland.]

"Paraclete", in koine Greek "a helper", "a comforter" or "an advocate" (in this sense contemporary Hebrew still uses a descendant of this word for some legal professions), is nowadays a term of distinctively Christian flavour, referring usually to the Holy Spirit. Bloch could hardly have been more explicit in the choice of his affiliation. But once again he borrows an established term for his own goals, this time arrogating the position of the Paraclete. In this strange mixture of German Idealism, Christianity and Gnosticism one thing is certain: Bloch's unshakeable faith in the future and his own mission. Perhaps then the worldly masks that he puts on are of lesser importance; what counts is the faith that the point in which return and ultimate novelty coincide is always before us. If one wants to

<sup>2</sup> "Es ist das beste an der Religion, daß sie Ketzler hervorruft." NOTE: all Bloch's texts whose translations to English have not yet been published are quoted from original German versions and followed by the author's own translations in brackets. If official translations exist, they are quoted without citing original texts.

apply the category of Marranism, Bloch would be in this regard a Marrano exiled into the conundrum of capitalist modernity,<sup>3</sup> in which all the sources and currents have been confused. The underlying substrate to which he pledges his ultimate loyalty is the future, which is the true meaning of God, as evidenced by his own self-definition in the formula of **אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה** from Shemot 3.14 (Bloch 2009, p. 79).

## 2.2. Judaism in Bloch's Writings

References to Jewish thinking and spirituality are interspersed throughout all Bloch's writings from the *Werkausgabe* from the very beginning (*The Spirit of Utopia*) up until the end (*Experimentum Mundi*). Apart from *Atheism in Christianity*, in which ancient Judaism and the milieu of budding Christianity is analysed with greater detail (Bloch 2009, pp. 17–179), these references do not form a solid block of comprehensive reflection. They crop up and vanish without much cohesion, as if Bloch deliberately wanted to attract attention to a theme which might be taken, against his intentions, for a central motive of his thinking.

Even if Bloch's interest in a broadly understood Jewish tradition is rather selective, it began early in his intellectual career. It seems that apart from his patchy religious upbringing he returned to Judaism in 1910–1911, while studying in Berlin, Munich and Würzburg (Münster 2001, p. 44; Münster 1985, p. 108). He was interested not only in the Kabbalah, but many other currents of Jewish spirituality, including Zionism, already in full swing at that time among German Jews. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine which sources he had firsthand experience with and which ones were filtered through syntheses and interpretations, especially German ones—by Jakob Böhme, Georg von Welling, Franz Hartmann, Franz Joseph Molitor and Franz von Baader (Boldyrev 2014, p. 92). It is worth noticing that he had begun his studies before Gershom Scholem's revival of Kabbalah studies, which naturally meant that any non-professional interest in this area must have been more sketchy and selective. As confirmed by references in his later writings, he probably read Zohar (Bloch 2009, p. 139; Münster 1985, p. 108). It seems nonetheless certain that Bloch's interest in the Kabbalah was devoted not solely to this tradition, but was part of his broader studies in theosophy, mysticism and heterodoxy—including such diverse authors as Meister Eckhart (for Bloch a long-lasting inspiration for conceiving relations between deity and human soul), Schelling and Rudolf Steiner. Apart from the Kabbalah, in the 20s Bloch drew heavily from Chassidism (appropriated via Buber), which particularly marked his *Spuren* (Münster 2001, p. 141; Moltmann 1976, p. 16).

In the 60s Bloch famously told the Israeli ambassador to Germany that he was not an assimilated Jew, but rather that he was assimilating into Judaism (Boldyrev 2014, p. 100). Enigmatic as this formula might sound, it seems that Bloch perceived Judaism not as a tradition that he was brought up in, but rather one of the currents that he selectively appropriated. The same applies to particular currents of Jewish spirituality and thinking. The influence of the Kabbalah on his writings seems rather limited (Münster 1982, pp. 134–37): at least in a literal reading, it seems that Bloch borrowed some particular concepts from this tradition rather than being more comprehensively shaped by it. Key moments in which the Kabbalah explicitly returns in his writings concern the origins of matter in the fall (in *Materialismusproblem*), *unio mystica* of the soul and God's presence modelled after the Shekhinah (even if Boehmian influence is here clearly detectable) and the idea of self-encounter (*Selbstbegegnung*), probably borrowed from Abraham Abulafia via Moses ben Jacob of Kiev (Münster 1982, p. 137; Münster 2001, p. 71; Münster 1985, pp. 42, 106–7; Boldyrev 2014, p. 105).

Apart from these rather patchy references, Bloch's long-lasting interest in Lurianic Kabbalah is noticeable. He explicitly considered Luria one of the greatest Kabbalists (Boldyrev 2014, p. 131), but judging by the sheer number of references in Bloch's work, the master from Safed was clearly

<sup>3</sup> As Wayne Hudson put it, "His aim was to develop a philosophical modernism with a theurgic effect: a modernism directed against the 'occlusion of the subject' under capitalism." (Hudson 1982, p. 28).



the most important Kabbalist for him. Yet even Bloch's eulogy of Lurianism in *The Principle of Hope* sounds ambiguous:

One of the greatest Cabbalists, Isaac Luria (1534–1572), introduced the idea of exile even into the teaching of the creation itself and thereby changes it completely; bereshith, the beginning, the word with which the Bible opens, thus became the beginning not of a creation but an imprisonment. The world came into being as a contraction (*tsimtsum*) of God, is therefore a prison from its origin, is the captivity of Israel as of the spiritual sparks of all men and finally of Yahweh. Instead of the glory of the alpha or morning of creation, the wishful space of the end or day of deliverance presses forward; it allied itself to the beginning only as to a primal Egypt which must be set aside. Little though such ramifications of Mosaism accord with the solemn hymn of Genesis, they correspond precisely to the original God of exodus and the Eh'je asher eh'je, the God of the goal. So Deus Spes is already laid out in Moses, although the image of a last leader out of Egypt, i.e., of the Messiah, does not appear until a thousand years later; messianism is older than this religion of the Messiah. (Bloch 1995, vol. III, p. 1237)

Taking Luria's concept of *tsimtsum* for a clear-cut theory of exile and imprisonment is a very strong Gnosticism-flavoured interpretation, stronger even than Scholem's rendition of the original *tsimtsum* as God's withdrawal (Schulte 2014, p. 385). What follows is a series of equivocations which blur the interpretative richness and vagueness of the original *tsimtsum*: Bloch sees in it "the captivity of Israel as of the spiritual sparks of all men and finally of Yahweh." For unknown reasons, God comes last (referred to with an interpretation of Tetragrammaton, a gesture uncommon even for non-religious thinkers indebted to Judaism). Then Bloch immediately twists *tsimtsum* to his own purposes, trying to show that it expresses nothing more than a primordial push forwards from the origins which are tantamount to imprisonment. Finally, Lurianism is blended without any explanation into the classic doctrine from the Torah. It is therefore difficult to take this reference to Luria as a well-informed inspiration: it is rather playing on a motive that Bloch did not know thoroughly and was not willing to study with due diligence.

Bloch quite often returns to Lurianic motives. Nevertheless, they always have some admixtures of other content which makes the final effect ambiguous and open for interpretative twists. It seems therefore right to point to various elements of Blochian imagery as having Lurianic connotations—for example his use of the concept of sparks dispersed in the vile and negativity-based world which retain the paradoxical memory of redemption that is to come, as well as the vision of human duty consisting in amassing shards of light, *reshimu*, in preparation of the Messianic moment (Boldyrev 2014, p. 104; Thompson 2013b, pp. 84–85). The image of sparks disseminated in the adverse world may, however, be indebted not only to Luria (Thompson 2013a, p. 17), but also (or even predominantly) to Gnosticism, of which Bloch was notoriously fond. Therefore, the position of the Kabbalah among Bloch's inspirations depends heavily on the interpreter's choice and it might be equally substantiated to view him, as Jürgen Habermas and Peter Sloterdijk did, as a "Marxist Schelling" (Habermas 1968, pp. 69–80; Sloterdijk 2016, p. 157). At the level of explicit references, the usage of Kabbalah is rather scarce and, as demonstrated earlier, fairly superficial. Bloch's voice is persistently polyphonic, which is why the Marranic tension does not appear in his direct Kabbalistic inspirations.

Consequently, if we take into account the epithelial layer of influences, it is hardly justified to view Bloch as a modern Marxist Kabbalist, although such claims were occasionally propounded (Münster 1985, p. 108). Naturally, it might be said that it is a matter of personal interpretation how much weight one attributes to a given current of inspirations in Bloch's thinking, but precisely the gesture of taking the Kabbalah for the central inspiration goes against the author's explicit statements and dissimulates the paradoxical inconsistency of his work. The same applies to loose associations between Bloch's style of writing and Kabbalistic inspirations made by Wayne Hudson:

Bloch uses cabbalistical and non-discursive techniques to refer indirectly (*Umweg*) to levels of experience under-represented or repressed by positivist epistemology. (Hudson 1982, p. 2)

The persistence of Bloch's style—almost always (with the notable exception of his Leipzig lectures on the history of philosophy) ravaged with notorious flaws, such as overcomplication, poetical ellipsis bordering on kitsch and amateurish inconsistency—is hardly an intentional application of Kabbalistic techniques. It rather seems that his innate convolutedness of expression produces a mysticising effect which might be taken for a Kabbalistic inspiration. In this sense, it might be argued that Bloch would be to 20th century philosophy what Kabbalists were to Rabbinic Judaism, but this analogy obviously does not make him a Kabbalist in himself.

### 3. Into the Deep: Bloch's Key Concepts in the Dispersed Light of Lurianism

If the epithelial level of Bloch's writings contains rather superficial references to Jewish spirituality and, more specifically, the Kabbalah, then tracing influences and borrowings yields somewhat unsatisfactory results. We can establish that Bloch mentioned Luria, referred to the Zohar and Jewish apocalyptic visions, but pinpointing the exact stream of influence seems a rather hopeless task. It is in this regard that Bloch's self-proclaimed "assimilation into Judaism"—absorbing its philosophical and spiritual heritage via other sources—bars the way to detecting (or rather re-constructing) the Marranic phenomenon. There can be no translation where the supposedly "original" language is appropriated lately and through multifarious mediations. The patchy tapestry of Judaism-related citations in Bloch's work hardly proves anything truly interesting, especially philosophically. It is certainly evidence of Bloch's acquaintance with some currents of Jewish spirituality, but deducing from it his essentially Kabbalist position would be a gross overstatement.

Are we then lost in the inconclusive tracing of references? Not necessarily, if only we modify the method and attempt to analyse some of Bloch's key concepts as sovereign formations which might be nonetheless interpreted as resounding with Lurianism. In this chapter I will propose their re-reading. It seems that by doing so we are going into the deep: yet in this depth—contrary to the epithelial level—all clearly traceable references are cut. As it will turn out, what we are left with is an undecidable possibility of Lurianic interpretation.

#### 3.1. The Darkness of the Lived Moment as the Perpetual *Tsimtsum*

The darkness of the lived moment is a concept which stands at the beginning of the schematic exposition of Bloch's thought. Indebted in this to Schelling and Böhme (Bloch 2009, p. 206; Hudson 1982, pp. 26, 73) and possibly to Kierkegaard (Münster 2001, p. 42), Bloch theorised the present as an occluded, permanently shifting moment which conceals impenetrable darkness. The concept itself recurs throughout Bloch's whole work. Let us begin with a fragment from *Atheism in Christianity*:

There is much that contrasts with a mere Beginning, a simple Has-been. First of all there is the darkness of the present Moment, always impinging but never grasped, never in possession of itself. The darkness which means that every real beginning is a future thing, alive in the past as a fore-shadowing of the future. Or, to put in other words, the veiled presence of the future here-and-now *is* the open-ended darkness of each present Moment, *is* the pregnant state of all that it contains. (Bloch 2009, p. 206)

With imagery modelled after German Idealism,<sup>4</sup> Bloch points to the radical ungraspability of the present moment which never squares with itself (Bloch 1975a, pp. 14–15). It comes as a surplus to the

<sup>4</sup> In *The Phenomenology of Mind* Hegel describes the insufficiency of language (or, to put it more broadly, the symbolic) in exhausting the qualities of a given particularity: "If nothing is said of a thing except that it is an actual thing, an external object, this only makes it the most universal of all possible things, and thereby we express its likeness, its identity, with everything, rather than its difference from everything else. When I say "an individual thing", I at once state it to be really quite a universal, for everything is an individual thing: and in the same way "this thing" is everything and anything we like.

already-happened, which is why past categories cannot describe it adequately. Bloch assumes that happening is a permanent rupture that at each given moment offers radical novelty which cannot be satisfyingly subsumed under any category which is already in use. Therefore each moment contains an element of radical future, which begins now, in the cut that keeps happening. This observation has a significant subjective dimension, because in the present moment we are estranged from ourselves:

Ich bin. Aber ich habe mich nicht. Darum werden wir erst.

Das Bin ist innen. Alles Innen ist an sich dunkel. Um sich zu sehen und gar was um es ist, muß es aus sich heraus. (Bloch 1985h, p. 13)

[I am. But I do not have myself. This is why we first become.

The “am” is inside. Everything inside is dark in itself. In order to see oneself and what is around, it must get out of itself.]

Existing in a given moment is nothing but persisting in the total darkness, in which we are an undifferentiated mass of innerness without possession of itself. Having oneself can take place only through becoming: in this regard we are not different from anything that exists through the openness to becoming. It is worth noticing that the darkness of the moment defies continuity of history and of the self: it opens everything towards the future and makes each being discordant with itself at the deepest level. One can exist only through becoming, just as if time were a powerful thrust that opens a hole in all beings (including us) and drags their existence into the future (Bloch 1985i, pp. 218–20).

Contrary to the well-known Hegelian theme (Miller Jones 1995, p. xiv), there is no final reconciliation, at least not before the messianic era. Each being can find itself only in its being-towards-the-future, which is why in every given moment it is a mutilated, incomprehensible darkness. Understanding arises in history; whenever a being is wrenched out of it, it means nothing. In order to describe the subjective effect of this vision, Bloch distinguishes two German words deriving from the same stem: *leben* (to live) and *erleben* (to experience, “to live-through”) (Bloch 1975a, p. 50). The first one pertains to mere existence, the second—to comprehension of it:

Was lebt, erlebt sich noch nicht. Am wenigsten in dem, daß es treibt. Wodurch, worin es also beginnt, noch ganz unten und doch in jedem Jetzt pulsand. Genau dieses anstoßende Jetzt ist dunkel, unser unmittelbares Bin und das Ist von allem. Was daran innen ist, wühlt als dunkel und leer.

... Alles was lebt, muß auf etwas aus sein oder muß sich bewegen und zu etwas unterwegs sein, die unruhige Leere sättigt draußen ihr Bedürfnis, das von ihr kommt. (Bloch 1985h, pp. 14–15)

[What lives is not yet experienced. Least of all in that it pushes on. Through which, in which it thus begins, still underneath, yet pulsating in every now. It is precisely this pushing now

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More precisely, as this bit of paper, each and every paper is a “this bit of paper”, and I have thus said all the while what is universal. If I want, however, to help out speech—which has the divine nature of directly turning the mere “meaning” right round about, making it into something else, and so not letting it ever come the length of words at all—by pointing out this bit of paper, then I get the experience of what is, in point of fact, the real [*in der Tat*] truth of sense-certainty. I point it out as a Here, which is a Here of other Heres, or is in itself simply many Heres together, i.e., is a universal. I take it up then, as in truth it is; and instead of knowing something immediate, I “take” something “truly”, I per-ceive (*wahrnehme, per-cipio*).” (Hegel 1977, p. 160). In Hegel’s view individuality is a trap: either we accept its description in the universal language, which is always general, or, if we want to seek “true particularity”, we are doomed to endless search, because individuality defies universal language. Bloch’s vision might be interpreted similarly: the present is ungraspable and inenarrable; it gains sense only when juxtaposed with other moments as one among many. Nevertheless, what makes Bloch different from Hegel in this regard is his stress on the radical novelty of each present moment: at any given point, something new appears which might totally transform the meaningful continuity of history. In this sense, the darkness dissipates into the light of its future explanation.



that is dark, our immediate “am” and the “is” above all. What is inside, rummages as dark and empty.

... Everything that lives must be on the lookout for something or must move and be on the way towards something, the restless emptiness outside satisfies its need that comes from it.]

Living is pushing on in its obfuscated happening; experience of what happened comes later. For this reason the present is a beating moment that keeps thrusting forward in a permanent insatiable need. But even if the moment gets somehow meaningfully melted into later history, it is always in a sense inexhaustible. In his Tübingen lectures Bloch speaks about “primordial darkness of the already lived moment” [*Das Urdunkel des gerade gelebten Augenblicks*] (Bloch 1985h, p. 273), which suggests that the present moment is shrouded by irremovable darkness. As Anton F. Christen pointed out, each interpretation of it is somehow false (Christen 1979, p. 167), as if the ontological rift between the present moment and its experience could never be adequately fulfilled.

With this twist, the darkness of the lived moment is elevated to the rank of pulsating and indefatigable source of the world at the crossings of the object and the subject. “Urdunkel” is something more than elusiveness of the present: it is a form of how the origin of the world appears to us, in its obfuscated form. The true origins in Bloch’s vision—just as in Benjamin’s *Ageseilus Santander* (Benjamin 1999, pp. 712–16)—are before us: only after history comes to its end will we know them, at the very moment when we reach them again and for the first time. But until history ends, we know the origins only under the guise that they take within it: and this guise is precisely the darkness of the lived moment. Consequently, the present, always shrouded in darkness, begins to resemble Cartesian *creatio continua*, albeit this time not begetting (and thus conserving) a perfect world, but being in itself a process of disintegration that expels towards the future the shards of its own restoration. In *The Principle of Hope* Bloch formulates a similar suggestion:

The start of the beginning and the starting-point called origin and world-ground is to be found in precisely that Now and Here which has not yet emerged from itself, i.e., which has not yet moved from its place at all. This origin in the strict sense has itself not yet arisen, arisen out of itself; its Not is therefore in fact precisely the one which is ultimately driving history and tailoring historical processes to its requirements, but which has itself not yet become historical. The origin remains the incognito of the core which moves throughout all times, but which has not yet moved out of itself. Every lived moment would therefore, if it had eyes, be a witness of the beginning of the world which begins in it time and time again; *every moment, when it has not emerged, is in the year zero of the beginning of the world*. The beginning occurs in it time and time again for as long as it takes until the undefined Not of the That-ground is decided, through the experimental definitions of the world-process and its forms, either as definite Nothing or definite All, according to its content; *every moment therefore likewise potentially contains the date of the completion of the world and the data of its content*. (Bloch 1995, pp. 307–8)

The lived moment is therefore not only the obfuscated origin of the world, “a witness of the beginning of the world” that keeps happening over and over again, but also the concealed potentiality of the world’s end. In a sense, in each moment everything is ready for the completion of the world: it does not happen due to a primordial deferral that wrenches the content of the moment from it and scatters it over the future. Nonetheless, it is only by this deferral that we might understand it; distance is necessary for knowledge, whereas nearness—although it contains the solution of the riddle—appears only as darkness:

the darkness of the lived moment is depictive for the darkness of the objective moment. That is, for the Not-Having-Itself of that intensive time-element which has itself not yet unfolded in time and process as manifested in terms of content. Not the most distant therefore, but *the nearest is still completely dark*, and precisely because it is the nearest and most immanent; *the knot of the riddle of existence is to be found in this nearest*. (Bloch 1995, p. 292)

Habermas interpreted this concept as indebted to Schelling (Habermas 1968, p. 71), but above the level of direct inspirations the (pra-)darkness of the lived moment can be read with a Lurianic spin. In Chaim Vidal's portrayal of the *tsimtsum*, God's initial contraction has two concurrent consequences: first, it empties the space for the creation of the world and second, it expulses the powers of **י"ד**, the judgment, out of God (Fine 2003, p. 130; Schulte 2014, pp. 67–68). The powers of the judgment in most versions of the *tsimtsum* give rise to matter, from which the created world is formed (Fine 2003, pp. 131–34).

Naturally, in Bloch there is no *Ein-Sof* per se, but the darkness of the lived moment conceals pleromic nearness which cannot support its own weight:

[D]as Jetzt ist die letzte Tiefe, ist der nicht nur alles bewegende, sondern auch alles enthaltende Augenblick, das noch verhüllte omnia ubique jedes Objekts. (Bloch 1985i, p. 114)

[The Now is the ultimate depth, is not only all moving, but also all-containing moment, the still veiled omnia ubique of every object]

The explosion which takes place in each given moment is thus equivalent to the *tsimtsum*, but in a reversed way, adequate to Bloch's reversal of the role of the past and the future. Whereas the Lurianic *tsimtsum* contracts the fullness of the *Ein-Sof* in order to open the space for creation, the Blochian lived moment crushes and contracts the stiff amassment of the past in order to pave the way for the radically new. The past is contracted and thrust open, with its content forcefully pushed into the future. It is in this sense that everything that exists finds its meaning only through what it will become, as if ultimately the origin of the world was not at the beginning, but at the end of the world. If so, then each moment of the present would be a contraction of the past, a kind of incessant *tsimtsum* which creates empty space for the radical novelty of the future. Simultaneously, it contains all potentialities of what a given thing might and will be: in this sense, it is equivalent to *Ein-Sof* which contracts itself in order to release the potential of beings. In this process matter plays a special role, to which I will return promptly.

Bloch is a consistent atheist; his God is nothing but a human creation, even if effectively an immensely powerful one. But if there is no God and no primordial act of creation, the *tsimtsum* cannot be a one-off prelude to it. Nonetheless, nothing better than this concept depicts the cut between fullness and openness that arises out of contraction. It seems therefore that Blochian ontology can be described as based on the ongoing rather than a one-off *tsimtsum*. Coming strikingly close to Benjamin, Bloch rejects the idea that the past is a closed totality, let alone one that burdens the present. On the contrary, the past never squares with itself, is never full or accomplished, because the Blochian *tsimtsum* pushes its content into the future. We are thus never indebted to the past in the sense of a Nietzschean burden of history: rather the past is indebted to us. The present in its darkness tears apart all cohesion of the past and makes it dependent on the future in which its guts are scattered.

### 3.2. Cracked Ontology and the Need of Tikkun

If we accept this vision of Blochian *tsimtsum*, it transpires that it is the fundamental condition of freedom, hope and utopia are born of the contraction of the stifling past. In *The Principle of Hope* Bloch remarks:

Only with the farewell to the closed, static concept of being does the real dimension of hope open. Instead, the world is full of propensity towards something, tendency towards something, latency of something, and this intended something means fulfilment of the intending. It means a world which is more adequate for us, without degrading suffering, anxiety, self-alienation, nothingness. However, this tendency is in flux, as one that has precisely the Novum in front of it. The Where To of the real only shows in the Novum its most basic Objective determinateness, and it appeals to man who is the arms of the Novum. (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 18)

The darkness of the living moment is thus double-faced: on the one hand, it has dramatically destructive potential, being a sombre spectacle of annihilating the past by an ungraspable power that eludes our understanding due to being in the greatest proximity to ourselves; on the other hand, it opens the new, bringing about the best of what was trapped in the past. To borrow one more term from the Lurianic repertoire, the contraction of the present produces sparks of light—of hope and utopia—dispersed in the emptiness that it opens up. Without this gaping openness of the future, being is almost nothing. In a brief fragment “An Sich”, reprinted in his *Literarische Aufsätze*, Bloch remarks:

Man ist. Das ist zu wenig, ja das wenigste. (Bloch 1985d, p. 11)

[One is. That is too little, indeed, the least.]

Existence in itself is the poorest ontological level. It might gain in meaning only when it is future-oriented, pregnant with its own tendency. Consequently, to grasp a being it is necessary to perceive it within the time dimension: at a given moment it is nothing. No being squares with itself, no being has its essence here and now or has a positive ground (Hudson 1982, pp. 51, 121). In a conceptual short-circuit of his philosophy (a kind of Hillel’s one-leg-jumping summary) Bloch summarises this vision with a formula playing on one of the classic sentences of the predicate logic: “S is not yet P” (Bloch 1985h, pp. 246, 274; Miller Jones 1995, p. xiii; Münster 1985, p. 74; Münster 2001, p. 89). A being never overlaps with its characteristics, because it is internally delayed due to the *tsimtsum* which delaminates it into elements trapped in various moments of time.

“*Noch nicht*”, one of the central Blochian concepts (Siebers 2012, p. 403; Bloch 1975a, p. 28), is an ambiguous term which might simultaneously mean “not so far”, “not yet”, “still not” (Hudson 1982, p. 20). Even against the background of Heidegger’s radical historicity, “*noch nicht*” is a far-fetched attempt to introduce the dimension of temporality into the heart of being. It inaugurates a future-oriented ontology, which does not begin with solid beings that change or move in time, but with beings whose very essence stretches over time. At any given moment beings are “not yet”, awaiting the moment of their completion, split by what Johan Siebers calls “ontological interspace” [*ontologischer Zwischenraum*] (Siebers 2012, p. 403). Their identity, instead of being given at the very beginning, is the highest and most ungraspable moment of utopia (Hudson 1982, pp. 126–27; Siebers 2012, p. 406) which will come only in the final messianic times, after the inner rift in beings is redeemed. Each moment of what has happened, once produced by the shifting of the dark present, falls into the mass of the past with its unrealised Messianic spark: it is the task of the future to return to it, bringing redemption (Bloch 1985h, p. 366). We, as human beings, are equally internally dispersed and hidden from ourselves; Bloch uses the term *homo absconditus* to describe this trait of human condition (Bloch 2009, p. 246; Daly 2013, p. 117). “*Dies septimus nos ipsi erimus*”, says Bloch after Augustine (Bloch 1968, p. 25), pointing to the fact that our identity will appear only at the final messianic day. Till then, as he claims in *Geist der Utopie*, “we carry sparks of the end on our way” (Bloch 1971, p. 383).

Therefore Bloch’s philosophy is always future-oriented. The past can never be understood in itself; its legacy is crucial not even for the present, which contracts it, but for the future, in which it will be accomplished (Raulet 1982, p. 43). As it will be argued later, Bloch perceives Marxism as a tradition which is epistemologically privileged to decode the past and the present with the perspective of the future (“*Only the horizon of the future, which Marxism occupies, with that of the past as the ante-room, gives reality its real dimension*” (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 285)), but concentration on the future might be viewed as a generalised form of Messianism (or “messianicity” in the generalised Derridean sense). Bloch openly embraces this idea:

Everywhere one looks, the Messianic is the last handhold of life and the ultimate resultant of the light of Utopian truth. To the clever that is folly, to the pious it is a pre-fabricated house, but to the wise the sense of Utopia is the most real and pressing problem of an unsolved world. It follows that life itself has sense inasmuch—precisely inasmuch—as it forms itself in dissatisfaction, in work, in rejection of the inadequate and in prophetic premonition of

the adequate. Man does not lose himself in these heights; he surpasses himself. (Bloch 2009, p. 239)

This *sursum corda* applies all the more when heaven is certainly not an existing Utterly Different but, as new heaven, new earth, is set as a utopian task; the *sursum corda* thus bears precisely the religious, i.e., messianic inherited—substratum. Founders of religion had behaved messianically long before the Jews took the messianic at its word, made it into the fundamental reduction of the religious, into the creation of kingdom per se. *Messianism is the salt of the earth—and of heaven, too; so that not only the earth but also the intended heaven should not become stupid.* The promise the numinous made, the messianic aims to keep: its Humanum and the world adequate to it are not only the thoroughly unfamiliar, the thoroughly unbanal, but the distant coast in early morning light. (Bloch 1995, vol. III, p. 1201)

Utopia is therefore not a property of any religion or spiritual tradition; it is part and parcel of generalised Messianism, which stems from the displacement of the past and the present in relation to the future. The past is being permanently constricted and thrust into the future, but the latter is not to be feared. Bloch's *tsimtsum* is a thoroughly positive process, by virtue of which the past finds its accomplishment in the future thanks to the utopian drive. In this manner the cracked ontology, itself result of the *tsimtsum*, is structurally linked to the necessity of utopia:

Utopia presses forward, in the will of the subject and in the tendency-latency of the process-world; behind the cracked ontology of a supposedly attained, even finished There. Thus the path of conscious reality-process is in fact increasingly one of the loss of fixed, even hypostatized static being, a path of *increasingly perceived Nothing, though consequently also of utopia.* The latter now completely encompasses the Not-Yet and the dialecticization of the Nothing in the world; but it just as little suppresses in the Real-Possible *the open alternative between absolute Nothing and absolute All.* Utopia, in its concrete form, is the tested will towards the Being of the All; the pathos of Being is therefore now at work in it which was previously devoted to a supposedly already completely founded, successfully existing world order, even supernatural world order. (Bloch 1995, vol. II, p. 312)

The cracked ontology in Bloch's thought means that no being can be adequately grasped as such. In order to see it in its proper dimensions, it is necessary to take into account the wake it leaves in the future—but not when it is evidently discernible, that is after a certain period of time, but already at its beginnings. Bloch is far from the banal argument that the essence of a process can be understood only after it takes place. Neither does he mimic Hegel in claiming that everything is a process and reveals its essence in time. For Bloch the future is what the past is to ordinary intuitions: an already readable dimension, in which everything that exists has its roots. It is for this reason that the future needs to be fundamentally trusted: it is not a terrifying dimension into which we are thrust from our cosy home, but our real homeland to which we travel from the unhospitable world of the past. It is only with reference to the future that we can be ourselves; it is only at the very end of it that we will gain our identity. Bloch's ontology introduces a crack into beings that Aristotle imagined as substances surrounded by a solid wall: from this crack it is dragged into the future. Within a given moment, the future inhabits beings under the guise of possibility (Bloch 1971, p. 335). Things might change, taking different paths of their possibilities. In this sense, the world is an ongoing experiment (Bloch 1985f, p. 413) that the future performs on the present. The ontology of "not yet" is always at the front of the coming novelty:

Utopische Ontologie hat als solche der Front und des Novum Unentschiedenheit, also Kampf vor sich, das durchaus noch ungelungene Reale des "ontos on", des wahren, wirklichen Seins steht in ihr offen.

... Ontologie des Noch-Nicht-Seins steht auf dem Niveau der alten Metaphysik, mit völlig verändertem Gebäude; neue Metaphysik und konkrete Utopie sind dergestalt Synonyme, geeint in *Transzendieren ohne Transzendenz*.

... Item: jedes Ding kann genauer, kann besser gedacht werden als es schon ist. Werden wäre ein sinnleerer Begriff, wenn das, was herauskommt, schon da wäre. Der Nerv des rechten historischen Begriffs ist das Novum, des rechten philosophischen das bessere Novum. (Bloch 1985h, pp. 355–56)

[Utopian ontology has, as such, undecidedness of the front and of the new, has thus struggle before itself, the still totally unrealised reality of the “ontos on”, of the true, real being, is open in it.

... ontology of not-yet-being is at the level of old metaphysics with a completely different building; new metaphysics and concrete utopia are synonyms, united in *transcendence without transcendence*.

... Item: each thing can be more accurate, can be thought better than it already is. Becoming would be a meaningless concept if that what came out was already there. The nerve of the right historical concept is the novelty, the better novelty of the truly philosophical.]

If each being has its roots in the future, it may be understood not through ordinary recollection (which would apply if it was embedded in the past), but in *Eingedenken*, paradoxical remembrance-of-the-future:

Wenn Erinnerung voraussetzt, daß etwas vergessen worden ist, so ist Vergessen insgesamt die Unterlassung, woran und wogegen Erinnern und Hoffen als *Besinnung* sich letztthin begegnen. Vom Ausfall Vergessen her erscheint Erinnerung als *Mahnung*, Hoffnung als *Eingedenken* ...

... Vergessen ist ein Modus der Erinnerung wie des Eingedenkens, ist jenes Defiziens, das im Gedächtnis Verlassen, im Eingedenken Verrat heißt. Vergessen ist so Mangel an Treue und wieder nicht einer Treue gegen Erloschenes, sondern gegen Unabgegoltene. (Bloch 1985h, p. 282)

[If recollection presupposes that something has been forgotten, forgetting altogether is the omission in which and against which remembering and hoping as reflection will meet in the end. By failure of forgetting recollection appears as admonition, hope as *Eingedenken* ...

... Forgetting is a mode of recollection, just like *Eingedenken*, it is that deficiency which is called abandonment in memory, and treachery in *Eingedenken*. Forgetting is lack of loyalty and again not loyalty to the extinct, but to the unfulfilled.]

The Jewish injunction to remember (Yerushalmi 1982) is thus reversed: it no longer concerns loyalty to those who lived and perished or to what existed and disappeared, but to the future that the past bore in itself. *Eingedenken* is both a form of recollection and cognition of what will happen, but is already inscribed in the utopian tissue of the past. Quite clearly *Eingedenken*—and, through its means, recuperation of what remains omitted in the past (Bloch 1971, p. 335), might be seen as a form of *tikkun* (Thompson 2013b, pp. 84–85). Ultimately it is nothing but bringing things to its origin, which is to be sought not before, but after them.

Blochian ontology might be thus read as combining two central Lurianic ideas—*tsimtsum* and *tikkun*—in one and the same device. *Tikkun* in the Lurianic tradition is an act of repairing the damaged world. Being a duty of all exiled Jews, it is meant to glean God’s sparks from *kelippot*, evil forces that arose from the excess of severe judgment (Fine 2003, p. 144). The task of *tikkun* makes human beings join the process of redemption: in Bloch’s atheist version, the onus is only on them. Recollecting traces of utopia from the inert and stifling mass of the past is like retrieving sparks from *kelippot*: bringing



them together materialises the utopian future. No being can exist without this redemption: otherwise it merely subsists, maimed in the disaster-ridden past.

### 3.3. Matter as Liberating Openness to the Future

The Lurianic reinterpretation of Bloch's utopia brings us to the last concept which I will attempt to view in the light of Kabbalistic inspirations: matter. Bloch is a staunch materialist, who devoted a whole book to a recital of older currents of materialism as viewed from the perspective of 20th century Marxism (Bloch 1972). Like Engels, he believed in materialism as a method of explaining the world with reference only to the world (*Erklärung der Welt aus sich selbst*—(Bloch 1968, p. 20)). In this sense, materialism is a factor of human liberation:

It is above all fear that keeps men submissive, but even the thought that wishes can be fulfilled from on high makes man a beggar. So it was not impudence that first turned irreligious (for impudence is proper to beggars), but humanness. And in this way materialism has always been endowed with a liberating role for man: it stood upright against the pressure from above, and set knowledge (the *sapere aude*, dare to use your mind) over against fate which, far from being seen through, was even glorified. And upright bearing, then, and the will to know sets the tenor of every great critique of religion ... (Bloch 2009, p. 49)

Materialism is then a particular method of sober thinking which has a cutting blade of anti-religious critique. But, contrary to the stereotypical portrayal of anti-Idealist and positivist materialism, Bloch's matter is not an utterly passive, malleable and dead block (*Klotz*), but an active factor of change (Bloch 1972, p. 126; 1985h, p. 230; Hudson 1982, p. 114). Wayne Hudson goes as far as to identify Bloch's matter with God (Hudson 1982, p. 157), but that seems to have a repositioning effect for the totality of equidistant elements of Blochian thinking. Bloch himself interprets matter as preserving in its latency the utopian potential of the future:

Matter is latent in these opennesses according to the direction of their objective-real hope-contents: as the end of self-alienation and objectivity encumbered with alien material, as matter of Things For Us. On the path towards this, the objective surpassing of what currently exists in history and world occurs: this transcending without transcendence, which is called process and is accelerated on earth so forcefully by human work. Forward materialism or the warmth-doctrine of Marxism is thus theory-practice of reaching home or of departure from inappropriate objectification; through it the world is developed towards the No-Longer-Alienation of its subjects-objects, hence towards freedom. (Bloch 1995, vol. II, p. 210)

It is precisely in matter that we need to seek fecundity and novelty (Bloch 1995, vol. II, p. 236). In a radically atheist manner, it is conceived as "transcending without transcendence" (*Transzendieren ohne Transzendenz*), that is, having a natural potency to change and bring about an utopian future without being a transcendence to the world (Bloch 1972, p. 478). It is a crucial bearer of what will happen:

Without matter no basis of (real) anticipation, without (real) anticipation no horizon of matter is ascertainable. Real possibility thus does not reside in any ready-made ontology of the being of That-Which-Is up to now, but in the ontology, which must constantly be grounded anew, of the being of That-Which-Is-Not-Yet, which discovers future even in the past and in the whole of nature. Its new space thus emphasizes itself in the old space in the most momentous manner: real possibility is the categorical In-Front-of-Itself of material movement considered as a process; it is the specific regional character of reality itself, on the Front of its occurrence. How else could we explain the future-laden properties of matter?—there is no true realism without the true dimension of this openness. (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 237)

Matter occupies the front of happening, being an active, protean factor of incessant change. Materialism in Bloch's sense does not presuppose the world full of inert substances that interact, but

rather a permanent process which happens not only to things, but in them. Matter is full of latent tendencies (Bloch 1972, p. 469) which await realisation: in a sense, it is richer and more inventive than we can be intentionally.

Bloch's materialism can be read in the light of Lurianic Kabbalah as an interpretation of what role God's sparks play in the world. Lurianism presupposes strong division of matter into evil *kelippot* and the scattered pieces of light that are entrapped in them. Matter has generally negative connotations, being a site of fall and sin (Fine 2003, p. 151) which requires acts of *tikkun*. In Bloch's vision, evil is associated rather with the closeness and blindness of human beings than with matter as such. When viewed in the correct light, it discloses its active and utopian potential, as if it preserved the whole richness of permanently happening *tsimtsum*. Only in this sense does matter have a quasi-divine position: in the radically atheist world of Bloch's thinking which keeps being ripped up by each consequent moment of *tsimtsum*, matter is the front of the coming novelty. Therefore it seems to be a God's spark in itself, which demands time and human effort to be brought to the height of its potential revealed in the utopian traces.

It is worth noticing what the absence of God entails in Bloch's thought: it transforms a one-off *tsimtsum* into a permanently recurring process which opens all beings into the future. In so doing he follows in the footsteps of Chaim Vital's interpretation of the *tsimtsum*, which accentuates that God's contraction is permanently renewed in order to allow the world to exist (Schulte 2014, p. 74). Nonetheless, Bloch's matter in its totality is equivalent to the Lurianic *reshimu*, being a silent companion to *tsimtsum* as the active factor of utopian change. There had been no perfect past before the fall, to which the redemption would constitute a match. On the contrary, the best is always still to come; the past had only the pleromic concentration of premonitions and utopian sparks, which will need to develop.

#### 4. Between the Epithelial and the Deep: The Non-Simultaneous in the Marranic Phenomenon

The two previous sections developed two different methods of reading Bloch in search of Marranic traces: the first consisted in retracing his explicit references to Jewish spirituality and the Kabbalah, whereas the second attempted to read three key concepts of his thinking as a profound atheist re-construction of Lurianism. The crucial question which needs to be answered concerns the relationship between the two methods.

Their point of convergence is limited: the first method allows confirmation that Bloch was familiar with Lurianism (albeit it is not certain to what extent and via which sources, as his account of Luria's Kabbalah is somewhat inaccurate), which makes the second method legitimate insofar as it assumes that Luria's teachings might have informed the engine concepts of Bloch's philosophy. Nonetheless, there is no logical bridge between the two. The epithelial approach yields certain, but quite trivial results. The deep approach is far more interesting, but the three concepts discussed above might be equally read as informed by works of Böhme or Schelling. There is no decisive interpretative clue which would make the Lurianic reading fully legitimate. Faith and orientation to the future, the closest contestants for this position, are in themselves too indeterminate to disclose a possible Marranic encryption.

Moreover, there are some significant discrepancies which make such a reading prone to criticism. To name just a few: is taking the darkness of the lived moment for a particular version of the *tsimtsum* not a too far-fetched metaphor? What is the relation between its immanent fullness and the totality of the past that it is supposed to contract? Is atheism a sufficient explanation of Bloch's positive valorisation of matter, so different in tone from Luria's vision? Can the reversal of the ordinary hierarchisation of the past and the future still be inscribed into the framework of Lurianism, no matter how transformed over the ages of interpretation?

One could obviously take this conundrum for a sign that Bloch's Marranic condition reached its fullness, melting with the languages he adopted to the point of undifferentiability.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, Bloch would invent a perfectly universalist language in which all the traces of Jewishness are so well concealed that they can no longer be recognised other than through their re-invention. Nonetheless, such a conclusion does not do justice to the specificity of Bloch's thinking, which does not advance from Judaism to Western philosophy, but rather blends all these languages in a somewhat chaotic manner. Are we therefore doomed to acknowledge the richness of the tapestry of Bloch's writing and desist from seeking in it an overarching framework?

Fortunately, Bloch himself provides a category which might shed light on the specificity of his unbridled multi-discursivism: *the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous*.<sup>6</sup> The concept stems from the very beginnings of Bloch's thought (Bloch 1971, p. 91; Münster 2001, pp. 40–41, 169; Münster 1985, pp. 41–42; Thompson 2013a, p. 15), but it gained its true importance in the analyses of Nazism developed in the late 20s and the 30s, finally published in the volume *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Bloch 1985b). In this usage, it was applied to describe the simultaneous co-existence—within one and the same society—of many elements (social strata, customs, ideologies, beliefs, imageries, etc.) which had their origins in different moments of history. Extrapolating Marx's suggestions, Bloch believed that progress never eradicates the past once and for ever. On the contrary, obsolete elements, once defeated by the force of progress, are pushed aside and subsist at the margins of society (Bloch 1985h, p. 91). For this reason modern society is never properly modern: it also, to a large extent, harbours pre-modern beliefs or prejudices. Society develops by differentiation in time: there are areas which are most up-to-date and those which lag behind. The success of Fascists and Nazis can be explained by noticing that in their political propaganda they addressed the obsolete strata of population via their latent out-of-date content of dreams and phantasies (Bloch 1985b, pp. 98–116; Hudson 1982, p. 44; Christen 1979, p. 106; Münster 1982, p. 241).

In Bloch's theory, all these non-simultaneous elements co-exist at the same time within one and the same society. Consequently, our meaning of time needs to be more complex than just the ordinary mechanical time of clocks (*Uhrzeit*). This time obviously plays an important role, especially in the modern society (Bloch 1985h, p. 130; 1975a, p. 93), but societies and history are shaped by meaningful times of human existence (Bloch 1985h, p. 136). In a crucial move Bloch assumes that times are multiple: each culture is governed by its own (Bloch 1985h, p. 135). Combined with the category of the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, such an assumption means that different times co-exist within one societal framework. Some strata of the society live closer to the actual front of the present, whereas others are defined by temporal retardation. Nonetheless, they interact, communicate and in this variegation shape social life, even if upon closer scrutiny they are discordant in their temporal dimension.

Therefore, if philosophy wants to recognise history and society in its true form, it needs to adopt multi-dimensional conception of time which Bloch models after Riemann's space. This conception encompasses "non-rigid, polyrhythmic historical times" (Hudson 1982, p. 147) that correspond not only to various cultures, but also to different moments in the history of each society (for example, the Russian 1917 is not as dense as the Russian 1967). Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of time which is full of curvatures (*krümmungsreiche Zeit*), which can be miraculously shortened in one messianic leap (Münster 2001, pp. 300–1). Bloch finally develops the concept of non-simultaneity to bring it to a sufficiently general level that it could describe, among others, the

<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, for radical Marranos, such as Sabbatians, total concealment of one faith is the desired goal (Scholem 1995, pp. 109–10).

<sup>6</sup> Bloch's original term, *die Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*, has been variously translated into English: as "contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous", "synchronicity of the non-synchronous" or "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous" (Miller Jones 1995, p. 51). Much as differences between them seem inconsequential, I prefer the last term, because the German word "gleichzeitig" or "Gleichzeitigkeit" belong to common rather than elaborate language.

complexity of Böhme's thought—drawing from Gnosis, Manicheism and Böhme's own epoch, the Renaissance (Bloch 1985g, p. 228). Simultaneity of the non-simultaneous is thus transformed into a universal theory of multi-dimensional times which interact within cultures, societies or individual thinkers' works, producing unpredictable clashes and synergies (Bloch 1975b, pp. 197–98).

Simultaneity of the non-simultaneous is a concept which lacks one last step: reflective application to Bloch's work as such. This move is not, perhaps, particularly bold, given that the unabating polyphony of his text makes an impression of giving place to the irreconcilable. Bloch audaciously juxtaposes—without melting—inspirations from multifarious spiritual, religious, philosophical and political movements, preserving the multi-dimensional temporality that he himself recognised in thinkers whom he found significant. But this reflexive application is more revealing if we take into account that simultaneity of the non-simultaneous is nothing but a well-thought consequence of the *tsimsum*, in which the very tissue of time gets ripped up: time is scattered into multiple times which all occupy the same universe. Some among them are like *kelippot*—obsolete, reactionary times which stifle growth and bring human beings back into the obscurity of the past. Some, however, have the position of *reshimu*, residues of divine light. Combining once more Marxism and mysticism, Bloch claimed that dialectical materialism and social strata which correspond to its message—with the particular role of the proletariat—are at the front of contemporaneity (Bloch 1985b, p. 159; Münster 1985, p. 82). They are simultaneous, living up-to-date and reading the signs that the current times give us.

If so, Bloch's thought, which in itself recognises multi-dimensional temporality and applies it in its development, does not apply or interpret the *tsimsum*, but mirrors it with its own structure. Simultaneity of the non-simultaneous is a concept which refers to societal, ideological and intellectual structuration of temporality, but, *simultaneously*, it is a concept that reveals the heterogenic character of Bloch's thinking. His writing is not "simply" incoherent or patchy: it moves through narratives of different times, which is why it can provide no overarching framework for them. His text bears affinity to the position of simultaneity: it constitutes an empty contingent container, in which discordant contents co-exist. In this sense, precisely by acknowledging non-simultaneity, Bloch elevates his thought to the only contemporaneity that is possible.

In the realm of the non-simultaneous one current is posited as predominant: Marxism.

Everything that is non-illusory, real-possible about the hope-images leads to Marx, works—as always, in different ways, rationed according to the situation—as part of socialist changing of the world. The architecture of hope thus really becomes one on to man, who had previously only seen it as dream and as high, all too high preappearance, and one on to the new earth. Becoming happy was always what was sought after in the dreams of a better life, and only Marxism can initiate it. (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 17)

At least declaratively, Bloch remained a staunch Marxist throughout his mature life. As mentioned previously, his Marxism was as heterodoxical as all his other re-appropriations of intellectual and religious traditions, which had very down-to-earth consequences, especially in relations with GDR authorities. In Bloch's own description Marxism has two main streams: the cold one, concentrated on economy, social structures and abstract analyses, and the warm one which absorbs all the humanistic and utopian impulses that had existed before Marx (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 209). Unsurprisingly, Bloch opts for the latter (Bloch 1985c, p. 219; Moltmann 1968, p. 46), simultaneously confessing his deep belief in the accuracy of Marx's insight:

*The concepts of practice until Marx are therefore completely different from his theory-practice conception, from the doctrine of unity between theory and practice.* (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 271)

*It must therefore be repeatedly emphasized: in Marx a thought is not true because it is useful, but it is useful because it is true.* (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 277)

*Only the horizon of the future, which Marxism occupies, with that of the past as the ante-room, gives reality its real dimension.* (Bloch 1995, vol. I, p. 285)

This heterodoxical Marxism seems to sum up nearly all of Bloch's interests (Habermas 1968, p. 69): utopia, orientation towards the future, class struggle, progress, redemption and the utopian society. Acknowledging Marxist reductionism of complex phenomena to economic materialism and Marxism's deficiency in anthropology, ethics, aesthetics and religion (Bloch 1985e, pp. 475–81), Bloch attempted to enrich it (Hudson 1982, pp. 40–42). It is in this sense that his ontology was meant to be a new metaphysics adapted to Marxism as the only truly future-oriented current of modern thinking (Hudson 1982, p. 104). In Bloch's view, Marxism should absorb all the progressive heritage of the past even in areas which at first sight may seem manifestly discordant with a scientific, atheist and materialist approach, such as religious movements or natural law (Hudson 1982, pp. 160–68).

Ultimately, Marxism is the only constant anchor in Bloch's thinking. Once again the pledge of loyalty is unconventional (but so typical for Bloch), because adamant support of Marxist hardliners (to the point of endorsing Stalinism) in his writings goes hand in hand with embracing the open, humanistic legacy of progressive humanity. It seems, however, that the unbridled simultaneity of the non-simultaneous in his work required some kind of orientation point, which would offer a solid signifier. It is for this reason that Bloch—at least in his own perception—was one of the key Marxist thinkers of the 20th century, even if mainstream Marxism ignored him almost entirely, especially insofar as it concentrated on economic theories. Yet the very heterodoxy of Blochian Marxism proves that it is rather a *space* than a consistent intellectual current. In this way Bloch forces Marxism open: unexpectedly, it is revealed as a part of broader, non-metaphysical ontology. In this form it turns into a uniquely modern kind of Lurianism, in which capitalism is equivalent to the world after the fall, while forces of utopia and communism shine like hidden sparks of God's light. And, unsurprisingly, faith remains the cornerstone of this new kind of Lurianism.

## 5. Conclusions

If Bloch can be interpreted as a philosophical Marrano, this can be done only after acknowledging his unique position which, in a sense, turns Marranism upside down. The inveterate incoherence of his thinking rules out any Marranic tension between the source and the translation: there is no source and no translation, because all inspirations are juxtaposed with tranquil disregard to their mutual relations.

At the epithelial level, references to spiritual and intellectual currents of Jewish thinking are numerous, but inconclusive. There is hardly anything that makes them more significant than, say, Renaissance utopianism. It often seems that Christian inspirations are more dominant. To make the situation even worse, references to the Kabbalah are somewhat superficial, not to say incorrect. By contrast, at the heart of Bloch's thinking one can discern a powerful philosophical engine which comes most clearly into view through the lens of Lurianic Kabbalah. Such an interpretation, however, forces its way through the dark: there are no definitive clues that would prove any kind of Kabbalistic influence on Bloch's central concepts. Hegelian, Schellingian and Marxist influences might also be used productively to dismantle them.

Yet in this conundrum Bloch's own concept of simultaneity of the non-simultaneous can bring understanding into the patchiness of his work. Even if its interpretation in the light of Lurianism is uncertain, one thing makes it resemble Luria's version of Kabbalah beyond any doubt: fundamental and irreconcilable shattering of the universe into different worlds, each governed by its own respective time. There is no need to find a common ground for all of them, just as there is no need—and no sense—to seek a key to Bloch's writings which would make them coherent. He openly accepts that the universe—perhaps as a result of a specific modern *tsimtsum*—is broken into irreparable pieces. Consequently, his work resembles the world it attempts to grasp, not by interpreting or drawing from Lurianism, but by repeating it with its very structure.

The only thing which remains constant in Bloch's work is faith: faith in the future, in utopia, in Marxism. With its force Marxism itself turns into a generalised future-oriented ontology of the scattered universe. Bloch's faith is unshakable, just as if it flowed from the certainty that there is a structural point in this collapsed world which will never fail. And indeed, the future can never fail,



whereas God has failed miserably. The world is pushing forward: is that not a sufficient proof that faith rightly has its object?

“To be open toward the future would be to be Jewish, and vice versa”, claimed Derrida in *Fever Archive* (Derrida 1996, p. 74). This is little, very little, especially if this kind of late Jewishness has been already re-appropriated by Western thinking through thousands of re-readings and transformations. Bloch does not require this kind of “secret faith” behind his work. In the immensely rich universe of his writings, faith in the future might be equally Jewish and philosophical. Perhaps if the *tsimtsum* is fully understood and believed in, no Marranic encryption is needed—the very scattering of languages means that they will co-exist and overlap, expressing the *tsimtsum* with their very existence. Faith has truth for its correlate: if one struggles for what is true, philosophy, Judaism and Marxism might be the one and the same without even touching each other.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In one of his early texts, entitled *Über motorisch-mystische Intention in der Erkenntnis*, Bloch writes: “Der Philosoph also reist nicht wie Münchhausen, von dessen Anwesenheit keines der beschriebenen Länder etwas verspürte, sondern er ist dazu gehalten, Baaders tiefer Forderung zu genügen: gleich einer Sonne über allen Kreaturen aufzugehen, damit er ihnen zur Manifestation eines Gottgleichen ver helfe. Und die ernennende, aufdeckende, schöpferisch informierende, schließlich identifizierende Kraft der Philosophie ist so groß, daß selbst das völlig enthüllte Jetzt, die vollkommene Vergegenwärtigung unserer gelebten Gegenwart, daß selbst noch dieses ehemals als Werk des Messias und der allverwandelnden Apokalypse Gedachte als Werk der Identifizierung ein philosophisches Werk darstellt.” (Bloch 1985i, pp. 116–17). [The philosopher, therefore, does not travel like Munchausen, of whose presence none of the described countries was aware, but he is obliged to fulfill Baader’s profound demand: to rise like a sun over all creatures, so that he help them come to manifestation of a godlike. And the calling, revealing, creatively informing, and finally identifying power of philosophy is so great that even the fully revealed Now, the perfect visualization of our lived present, that even this work of identification, formerly thought to be the work of the Messiah and the all-transforming Apocalypse, represents a philosophical work.]

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